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ABSTRACT

Inclusion of oral exams as a regular part of the school-based testing program has the advantages of providing motivation to learn oral skills, oral testing experience, additional opportunities for students to perform well, and improved relationships with students. However, logistical problems can be substantial. Adequate time for and efficient timing of interviews are both necessary. Constructing a test that both provides for a reasonably normal conversation and allows the examiner to assign grades is difficult, but it can be aided by several techniques: isolating aspects of oral competence and testing them separately, scoring according to specific, predetermined level expectations, retrospective grading or use of separate grader and interlocutor, or peer interviews. Techniques such as role-playing can also be used to extend the scope of the exam. At the lower levels, the students' own teacher should be the examiner, and at the upper levels, teachers should test each others' classes for the students to have the experience of different voices and approaches. (MSE)

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IMPLEMENTING ORAL EXAMS AS PART OF THE SCHOOL EXAM SYSTEM

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IMPLEMENTING ORAL EXAMS AS PART OF THE SCHOOL EXAM SYSTEM

Oral exams are time-consuming, disruptive, exhausting for teachers and stressful for students: is it really worthwhile including them in the internal exam system of your school?

In my school, our experience has been that it is, for obvious and some not so obvious reasons. Of course, the main aim is to provide practice and experience in the one-to-one oral interview which can be such a terrifying event for students and, indeed, familiarity does at least alleviate the stress involved. Motivation too is improved. The old cliché which is used to berate teachers - "only what is examined is taught" - should be rephrased, perhaps more accurately: "only what is examined is learned". School life has become so competitive that it is certainly difficult to motivate students to work on their oral production if there is nothing in it for them, at the end of the year, in terms of exam marks.

However, decreased stress and increased motivation are not the only plus factors. You may well be delighted to find that some of your weaker pupils who struggle hopelessly with written work and are too timid to speak much in class can actually shine when they have your individed attention in the oral exam. Obviously, the experience of even modest success in this area is bound to have a beneficial effect on their attitude to the whole subject. (Unfortunately, the converse can also be true: one of your best pupils, who answers confidenly in class, may turn into a quivering mass of nerves when he/she faces you alone across a desk; however, at least you know in time that that pupil will need extra help before facing "the real thing" at Leaving Certificate level.)

Perhaps the best, and certainly, to me, the most unexpected result of holding oral exams is an improved relationship with students as individuals. After all, how else would you ever find time to chat privately with each and every individual you teach? You gain new insights into their personalities, attitudes and circumstances: even quite serious problems, which you never suspected existed, can come out, however haltingly, during the oral. In this context, it is important that, as far as posible, the oral should resemble a normal conversation, and not an inquisition where the teacher asks the questions and the pupil gives the answers. So, if you have been asking her/him about her/his family, share some little piece of information about your own family; and if you are being inquisitive about what goes on in your student's life at the weekend, it's only polite to say what you do outside school hours yourself! Students should be encouraged too to ask questions, even if you don't always answer them truthfully! The danger is that students may otherwise leave

their oral with the vaguely resentful feeling of having been "grilled" or in some way exploited.

Once having made the decision to implement oral exams, you may well feel overwhelmed by the logistical problems involved. Just keep firmly in mind that almost any kind of oral is better than none. One myth does however need to be exploded: the idea that a teacher can somehow hold oral exams in the classroom during class periods. This really cannot work. If you bring an individual up to your desk, he/she is bound to be painfully aware of the massed audience behind and you will be constantly distracted by noise or discipline problems. On the other hand, any system which involves going around the class with questions, while it may be a valuable exercise in itself, is certainly not a one-to-one interview.

So orals really must take place outside the classroom. On the basis of a 5-6 minute interview, you will need to allow at least three and a half hours to examine a class of 30 pupils. It is essential to devise an efficient shuttle system so that there are no long delays between one candidate and the next; even so you will inevitably spend 30 seconds or so marking the preceding exam and/or waiting for the next candidate to get settled. How this time is to be found will depend largely on the internal organization of the individual school and the goodwill of the management. I intend to list four different systems which we have tried in my school, giving their respective advantages and disadvantages, in the hope that something here may provide at least a starting point for experimentation.

1. During the weeks preceding the written exams, and in the periods normally allocated to the language concerned, classes are supervised in the study hall or their own classroom and pupils come out one at a time for their interview with their class teacher.

   Disadvantages: - Valuable class time is lost.
   - Extra supervisors may be needed if supervision is not normally provided during the day in the study hall.
   - One individual's oral may take place two weeks before that of another individual in the class.

   Advantages: - Least disruption of the timetable.
   - Least wear and tear on teachers as orals take place within normal teaching periods.

2. Orals are scheduled outside normal school hours, perhaps on Saturdays. Each student is told to attend at a specific time. Teachers may be compensated by being given extra free time during the period of the written exams.

   Disadvantages: - Students hate this system and may turn

up late or not at all, so the schedule is disrupted.
- Unsupervised students leaving their oral will naturally compare notes with those waiting to go in.
- Examiners may be distracted by noise from students waiting outside.

Advantages: - No disruption of the normal school timetable.

3. During the period of the written exams, students come out one by one from the written exam of the language concerned to do their oral. As the written exam is unlikely to be long enough to allow a teacher to examine the whole class, extra time must be found. In our school, the morning exam is preceded by a study period so a full morning is available for orals.

Disadvantages: - Exam supervisors may object to the constant movement in and out of the exam hall. (Perhaps surprisingly, we found that students doing written exams did not complain of disruption.)

Advantages: - The whole class is examined in both oral and written language on the same day.
- As students are working on the written exam of the language concerned, they are in the best possible position to perform well in their oral.

4. The written examinations are interspersed with morning-long study periods during which students are supervised in the exam hall and come out one by one for their language orals. During the morning there are two 10-minute breaks.

Disadvantages: - The period of the written exams must be extended.
- A full morning of study may be too long for 1st and 2nd year pupils. They may have to be provided with alternative activities (perhaps P.E. or games) for the middle period of the morning.

Advantages: - If the study period takes place on the morning before the written exam in the language concerned, both parts of the exam can be completed on the same day.
- Students revising for the afternoon written exam are in a good position to perform well in the oral.

When you have decided on a timetable for the oral exams, you then come to grips with the problem of how to structure the oral

itself. The most obvious format is that in which the teacher assumes the dual role of interlocutor and assessor, but it is a most difficult role to sustain. It is virtually impossible to carry on a reasonably normal conversation which unobtrusively tests various aspects of linguistic competence, while at the same time assigning grades or marks. Also, any attempt to write down marks has the effect of "throwing" the student, who loses concentration through trying to read the marks upside-down! On the other hand, if you delay assessment until the oral is over, you may well feel that you are marking on a rather vague impression of the student's overall performance.

There are techniques which can help with this problem, though they do not solve it. You might consider isolating certain aspects of oral competence and testing these separately. For example, pronunciation and intonation could be tested by reading some phrases or sentences which are assessed immediately, and then these aspects are disregarded during the remainder of the exam. You would probably also find it helpful to assess intially in terms of "bands" which can be translated later into grades or percentages. This means that with a particular class in mind, you simply sit down and write a description of how you would expect an "A" student in that class to perform. Your description would include such aspects as comprehension, fluency, structure, vocabulary, pronunciation and intonation. You then do the same for a "B" student, and so on. For example, the band-description of a 3rd year "D" student might read as follows:

Comprehension: understands most slow speech but sometimes needs repetition or rephrasing.
Fluency: answers appropriate, but often monosyllabic and usually halting.
Structure: fairly frequent mistakes but not sufficient to prevent communication.
Vocabulary: barely adequate.
Pronunciation and intonation: fairly frequent mistakes, but not sufficient to prevent comprehension.

Immediately after each oral you decide which band most adequately describes what you have just been listening to, perhaps adding a note as to whether you would place the student at the upper or lower end, or middle, of the band.

However, the intrinsic problem of the dual interlocutor/assessor role still remains. We tried various ways of avoiding the problem; we found no ideal solution, but there were partial successes and some interesting results. Again, I should like to give a brief description of the various experiments in the hope that you may find something of use in your situation.

1. Retrospective marking. This simply involves running a tape recorder unobtrusively during the oral and assessing the recording later. Mechanical falure and/or human error can cause difficulties, but the main disadvantage was that the technique is so time-consuming. A 5-minute oral may take up

to 15 minutes to correct as it is impossible to resist the temptation to replay sections of the tape when listening for particular points. Also a recording cannot reproduce gesture or facial expression, which are both valid parts of communication.

2. Two language teachers are present at each oral, one acts as interlocutor, the other remains silent and assesses only. This might be almost ideal if it were not, once again, for the time factor: the number of teacher-hours involved is obviously doubled. This can be reduced to some extent if the interlocutor interviews two pupils at the same time.

3. Senior students are involved as interlocutors. For example, 5th years might interview 2nd years. Of course, the senior students must be carefully prepared: they are given a list of suitable questions to ask, including two or three ways of rephrasing each question; they are taught how to put candidates at their ease and how to respond (for example: "Oh, you play rugby - yes, I like rugby too. What other sports do you like?"); and they are given time to practise on each other in class. Naturally, they can never be as skilful as a teacher in eliciting responses, but there are many positive factors. Most importantly, the teacher is free to assess accurately, but also candidates are often less intimidated and respond better. The senior students certainly benefit: they take their responsibility very seriously, even the weaker ones blossom through being entrusted with this task, and they all get practice in asking questions, an essential element in communication which is often neglected in class.

4. Two pupils from the same class interview each other. The teacher provides the framework for the conversation. For example, two 1st or 2nd years might be told to imagine that it is the first day at school, they don't know each other and want to find out as much as they can about each other. The teacher's role is then mainly that of assessor, although she/he may have to intervene at intervals to move the conversation along, or to redress the balance if one candidate tends to monopolize communication. This system is particularly suited to juniors as it is just a version of the pair-work they are used to in class and so is as non-threatening as it is possible for an exam to be.

So far, most of what has been said refers to the "general conversation" type of interview, but there are other exercises, notably role-play, which can extend the scope of the oral exam. By means of role-play, students can be asked to perform very varied tasks such as giving directions to tourists, booking rooms in a hotel, complaining about poor service, or giving a report to the police at the scene of an accident. It seems to me unfair to ask a student in an exam situation to be anyone other than himself, and so the teacher must take the part of the policeman, hotel clerk, etc. We are back then, in at least this part of the

exam, to the difficulty of sustaining the dual role of interlocutor (+ actor!) and assessor. In spite of this, role-play is very worth while. Besides the extended scope already mentioned, it also provides a framework where the linguistically weaker but creative and extrovert student can shine. Getting the message across is the essence of this type of exercise and must deserve at least a pass grade, however ungrammatically it may be done.

Finally, a word on who the examiner should be. In our experience, junior classes need the security of their own class-teacher as oral examiner: the situation is stressful enough for them without having to cope with a new voice and personality. However, in Senior Cycle it must be a good idea for teachers to examine each other's classes wherever possible. In this way students get some experience of different voices and different ways of approaching topics; this is what they will have to face eventually in the Leaving Certificate.